

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**The Vancouver Art Gallery Presents**  
***Emily Carr: Navigating an Impenetrable Landscape***

*A new exhibition probes Emily Carr's profound belief in the beauty and spiritual vitality of BC's forests*



**January 24, 2025, VANCOUVER, BC // Traditional Coast Salish Lands including the xʷməθkʷəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.**

The Vancouver Art Gallery is excited to launch a new year-long exhibition about one of the most significant artists in Canada's history, **Emily Carr** (1871–1945). Featuring more than 20 of Carr's signature forest paintings, *Emily Carr: Navigating an Impenetrable Landscape* recognizes the natural world as one of Carr's lifelong inspirations, taking as its subject the experience of imaginatively entering the space of the forests that she painted. Visitors will encounter a densely hung group of paintings of thick forest scenes faced off on the opposite wall by a single Carr painting of a clear-cut landscape with an open horizon. The exhibition deliberately draws out the physical experience of the opening and closing-off of space in Carr's forest scenes.

"Emily Carr's forest paintings profoundly shaped the way British Columbians perceive their surroundings to this day," says **Anthony Kiendl**, CEO & Executive Director of the Vancouver Art Gallery. "We are honoured to celebrate Carr's enduring legacy, the Emily Carr Trust and our commitment to showcasing Canadian art."

Carr captured the coastal forest landscape in a way previously unseen in British Columbian art. Driven by a Romantic desire for a spiritual union with nature, she was able to combine her knowledge of avant-garde Modernism from her studies in Europe with a deep engagement with the rainforests of BC's West Coast to create a unique and powerful vision.

**Richard Hill**, the Smith Jarislowsky Senior Curator of Canadian Art at the Vancouver Art Gallery, describes his inspiration for the exhibition: "From my earliest encounters with Carr's paintings I was struck by the density of her forests; not only the thickness of the growth, but the way she paints it. In her later works she stylizes trees and bushes into massed, solid volumes, often closing off space—or at least making it challenging to project yourself into the space of the painting. Recently, I wondered what her treatment of space might tell us about her aspiration to connect with nature. It seemed to me that spatially the paintings both promise and resist that impulse."

When writing about her landscape paintings, Carr would sometimes describe how an eye might move through the imagined space in the work. Of travelling to Ontario to meet artist Lawren Harris she wrote: "As I came through the mountains, I longed to cast off my earthly body and float away through the great pure spaces between the peaks, up the quiet green ravines into the high, pure, clean air. Mr. Harris has painted those very spaces, and my spirit seems able to leave my body and roam among them."

It is striking, then, that so many of Carr's paintings create an experience of dense, impenetrable forest that confounds such forward movement. In many cases, the viewer is tantalized with the opportunity of communion with a carefully observed natural environment, while simultaneously foiled at the prospect of imaginatively entering its depths. In its exhibition design, *Emily Carr: Navigating an Impenetrable Landscape* looks specifically at space as a metaphor, particularly as experienced in the rainforests of the Pacific Northwest that surround Vancouver and dominate BC's coastal landscape. Ironically, many of her spatially open works are open precisely because they depict landscapes that had been recently subject to clear-cut logging.

All landscape paintings are the product of an artist's encounter with an observable reality that is then processed through the assumptions and choices they make in selecting and depicting what they have seen. In Carr's case, she was both a careful observer—anyone who has spent time in the rainforests of the Pacific Northwest will have encountered dense walls of trees and undergrowth—and someone primed by a tradition going back to eighteenth-century Romanticism to seek spiritual transcendence in communion with nature.

The title of the exhibition suggests the paradox arising from a desire to navigate that which is impenetrable. It reflects the tension in Carr's paintings between the passionate wish for union with nature and the challenge posed to an artist hoping to render that experience through the mediation of paint on canvas; in other words, as a form of visual culture.

*Emily Carr: Navigating an Impenetrable Landscape* is open from January 25, 2025, until January 4, 2026. The exhibition is organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and curated by **Richard Hill**, Smith Jarislowsky Senior Curator of Canadian Art.

For more information, please visit: [www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/exhibitions/emily-carr-navigating-an-impenetrable-landscape](http://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/exhibitions/emily-carr-navigating-an-impenetrable-landscape)

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## VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

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Image: Emily Carr, *Old and New Forest*, 1931-32, oil on canvas, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust

### ABOUT EMILY CARR

Emily Carr was born on December 13, 1871, in Victoria, British Columbia, to Richard Carr and Emily Saunders, the fifth child in a family of five girls and one boy. Her father was a British immigrant who, after years of aimless travel, had found success in Alviso, California, selling supplies to miners during the Gold Rush. He met Emily Saunders, married her in England and in 1863 moved his young family to Victoria, BC.

Carr's sensitivity and devotion to art isolated her from her sisters, who failed to understand either her work or her desire to pursue it in spite of financial strain. Even without her family's support, Carr remained steadfast in her commitment to art. In her late teens, after the death of both parents, rather than be subjected to the demands of her overbearing sister Edith, Carr approached her legal guardian to secure funds to attend the California School of Design. She spent more than three years in San Francisco, where she received a traditional education in the depiction of still lifes and landscapes.

After returning to Victoria for a brief time, Carr travelled to England and studied at the Westminster School of Art and in the private studios of several British watercolourists. Here too her instruction was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century British watercolour tradition. Her year of study in France between 1910 and 1911 proved to be more inspiring: Carr learned from a number of instructors how to paint in a Post-Impressionist style with a Fauvist palette.

She returned to Vancouver in 1911, committed to representing Indigenous cultures of British Columbia, an exercise that she had initiated in 1907. During an ambitious six-week sketching trip to Haida Gwaii in the summer of 1912, she produced a great number of watercolours and corresponding studio canvases in her new French-inspired style. These works met a mixed reception and had limited sales, so Carr returned to Victoria to build and manage an apartment house with her share of the family estate.

She was consigned to this occupation for nearly fifteen years until 1927, when her work was included in a National Gallery of Canada exhibition, and she first met the Group of Seven. She found the work of Group member Lawren Harris to be particularly inspiring, as were his words of encouragement and his pronouncement that she was "one of them." She returned from this eastern trip to begin the most productive period of her career, creating the powerful canvases for which she is best known. She also began a lifelong friendship and correspondence with Harris, who acted as her mentor and spiritual guide, especially in the few years after their initial meeting.

Carr's health began to deteriorate in 1937, when she suffered the first of many heart attacks. As her sketching trips and studio painting became physically harder, she started to focus on literary pursuits. Carr died in Victoria on May 2, 1945, after checking herself into St. Mary's Priory to rest.

Carr slowly began to achieve commercial and critical success in the concluding years of her career, yet the renown she enjoyed barely compares to the esteem in which she is held so widely today. Her life is irrevocably connected with the Pacific Northwest Coast, the place where she was born and where she chose to spend the majority of her life. Her independence as a woman when domesticity was expected; her resolve to travel frequently and unaccompanied; and her devotion to art despite the obstacles, distractions and criticism remain inspirational. Her current artistic and literary achievements and celebrity status in Canada would come as a great shock to Carr who, for most of her life, felt like an outcast.

## **ABOUT THE EMILY CARR TRUST**

When Lawren Harris first questioned Emily Carr about how she planned to distribute her paintings after her death, she allegedly replied, "Give them to the old folks' home. I suppose they would put them in the basement, and there they would rot." Worried about the preservation and care of Carr's work, Harris worked with Ira Dilworth, who became Carr's literary executor, to devise the Emily Carr Trust collection. Carr selected a group of fifty paintings to bequeath to the people of British Columbia, with consultation from Harris and anthropologist William Newcombe. Carr chose the Vancouver Art Gallery to house her Trust because Victoria did not have a major public art institution at the time. She had also established a close relationship with a former curator of the Gallery **A. Savell Grigsby**, who was an early supporter of Carr's practice and organized several of her solo exhibitions at the Gallery.

After Carr's death in 1945, Newcombe and Harris revisited the contents of her studio, and Harris divided the remaining works into three groups: those to be destroyed, those to be sold and those to be added to the Trust and Scholarship collections. A large selection of Carr's sketches and early works were initially marked to be destroyed, but Newcombe saved them and eventually sold the collection in its entirety to the Government of British Columbia, now housed in the Provincial Archives. Harris was unable to sell Carr's paintings as quickly as he had anticipated and as a result made further additions to the Trust collection out of the works intended for sale. With these new additions, the final collection totaled 173 works.

The Vancouver Art Gallery is home to the Emily Carr Trust collection, the finest collection of Emily Carr works in the world. Though the Gallery is fortunate to have major works from throughout her career, the collection is particularly rich in her forest paintings from the 1930s. These include both her canvases and oil on paper works, a medium she began using during that period. The Vancouver Art Gallery receives a steady stream of loan requests, and the artworks remain a significant component of the Gallery's holdings. A selection of Carr's work is almost always on display at the Gallery, and her life and work continue to captivate new generations of artists, scholars, students and art lovers around the world.

## **ABOUT THE VANCOUVER ART GALLERY**

Founded in 1931, the Vancouver Art Gallery is recognized as one of North America's most innovative visual arts institutions. The Gallery's celebrated exhibitions, extensive public programs and emphasis on advancing scholarship all focus on historical and contemporary art from British Columbia and around the world. Special attention is given to the accomplishments of Indigenous artists, as well as to those of the Asia Pacific region. The Gallery's exhibitions also explore the impact of images in the larger sphere of visual culture, design and architecture. The Vancouver Art Gallery is a charitable not-for-profit organization supported by its members, individual donors, corporate funders, foundations, the City of Vancouver, the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts.

*The Vancouver Art Gallery is situated on the ancestral and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations, and is respectful of the Indigenous stewards of the land it occupies, whose rich cultures are fundamental to artistic life in Vancouver and the work of the Gallery.*